

Knowing The Rules

To us NCI Watchkeepers in our lookout tower at the harbour entrance, it often feels strange that occasionally water-borne visitors will arrive without knowing that there are rules dictating how to enter, where you can go, and who you have to speak to. They don't seem to realise that Portsmouth is the home of the Royal Navy, has a lot of commercial and cruise movements, and is the second busiest ferry port in the UK. Visiting skippers who get things wrong do rather often 'get away with it' if the port is quiet, only to keep getting it wrong on subsequent visits. But then there are times when ignorance of the rules causes disruption and annoyance, and sometimes worse.

Take for example the case of a small rowing boat we spotted recently. It first appeared as a small dot in the far distance, and seemed to be midway between 1Bar and 2bar buoys.... It was in the centre of the channel. As it gradually got closer – still in the centre of the channel – it turned out to be a rowing boat, of the type used to do trans-Atlantic charity crossings, and was assumed to be out for training. As it seemed to have no intention of joining the Small Boat Channel, we phoned up KHM to bring it to their attention.

And so it entered the harbour, still in the centre, oblivious to KHM's calls on the radio. It was also oblivious to the five "I do not understand your intentions" hoots made by a large commercial vessel making to leave the harbour and then abeam of KHM's signal tower. Had the cox of this rowing boat looked behind him, he would also have seen a cross channel ferry a mile or so away in the bar channel wanting to enter the harbour.

The outgoing vessel was forced to slow down; the rowing boat went past him starboard to starboard without mishap, and then came to a stop to the north of Ballast pile. The outgoing and incoming vessels then had to pass each other in the Bar channel at a point they had not intended to. Eventually the row boat entered one of the marinas on the West side of the harbour, and everyone else breathed a sigh of relief.

Well, the crew on the rowing boat got away with it... mainly due to the lookout and actions of two commercial vessels. But with seamanship like that will they get away with it next time ?

Another case was that of a foreign sailing yacht, approaching the harbour more-or-less in the Small Boat Channel, and all going well. But at about 150 yards out it started veer towards the Round Tower, and entered the harbour in the centre of the channel. As before, we spoke to KHM to make sure they had seen it. The yacht then passed port to port with (you guessed it) an outbound large commercial vessel and made stately progress toward Gunwharf Quays. When nearing the Camber Pile it did start making radio calls, but unfortunately they were rather unintelligible.... and to be frank, far too late to be asking for any kind of permission.

And so they entered Gunwharf marina, and we thought it was all over.

No it wasn't. Shortly after entering, it left the Gunwharf, and without called for permission to cross made diagonally towards the refuelling jetty. Calls to it by KHM went unanswered. Eventually it went into a marina on the west side of the harbour. And then it was all over.

NCI is not a police force; we are not there to enforce the harbour rules nor to penalise those skippers who break them, either wilfully or through ignorance. But NCI is concerned with maritime safety, and the rules are there to keep vessels safe. Abiding by the rules will help avoid potentially dangerous conflicts between large vessels and small pleasure craft. So please try to avoid behaving like the vessels described above.

And that was to have been the end of the article. But this writer was on watch this morning (July 19) and saw some things of interest that are worth passing on.

Being very close to the Fastnet race, we saw a lot of large (over 20m) racing yachts going in and out of the harbour; probably they had positioned here to be close to the race start point. Those that were going out presumably were intending a last shakedown or training. Mostly they were foreign; we saw vessels registered in Denmark, Netherlands, Germany, France and Austria – the Fastnet truly is an international race. NCI logs all foreign yachts as a matter of routine.

Unfortunately – and we were disheartened to note this - many of them seemed to disregard the need to speak to KHM on the radio, especially as they were using the main channel not the Small Boat Channel. Indeed some vessels that were specifically asked by KHM to keep a careful radio watch on Channel 11 failed to respond when called later, at a time when the main channel was getting uncomfortably busy. While the earlier sections of this article talked about visiting vessels breaking the rules, it seems that professionally-crewed racing yachts are likewise not immune to this. Frankly – and be clear that this is a personal opinion – it was a bit disappointing. We lost count of the times KHM apologised to ferries and suchlike for the presence of other vessels that they could not contact. In the harbour and approaches it is not all about “you”; it *is* about sharing the space with multiple other vessels, and doing so safely.

Maybe we should have given this article the title of ‘Use Your Radio Properly’. I wish you good luck in the race everyone, but I hope you keep a better radio watch than you did today.